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## CONNECTING THE DOTS IN NORTH CAROLINA'S CITIES:

How the Charlotte and Triangle Regions are Using Transit Planning to Create Prosperous and Resilient Futures

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## ABSTRACT

North Carolina's two largest and fastest-growing metropolitan areas are working to manage growth and position themselves for continuing vitality. An important component of this work is planning for transit expansion. In the Charlotte region, planners have embarked on an ambitious public engagement strategy, known as the Regional Transit Engagement Series, to build a dialogue with government staff, elected officials, and private sector leaders in small and medium-sized communities that fall within the path of urban growth. In the Triangle region, planners have adapted to jurisdictional fragmentation and "cooperation" by working with and nurturing citizen coalitions, providing education and information, adapting to transit funding and planning hurdles, and planning for placemaking and affordable housing around transit nodes. These processes should be watched closely by planners looking for ways to expand economic opportunity and improve livability as our communities grow.

## BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Metropolitan areas are facing increasing changes in market, climate, and sociopolitical conditions throughout North Carolina and the United States. In addition to governmental hurdles, revenue loss, and market volatility, metro areas must overcome jurisdictional fragmentation and local autonomy to establish a regional identity, expand opportunity, and become more equitable. North Carolina's two largest and fastest growing metropolitan areas are working to address these and other challenges by nurturing coalitions and planning for transit.

By expanding transportation choices for residents, case studies and empirical evidence show that local governments improve access to housing, jobs, and services; promote innovation and workforce development; and provide opportunities for placemaking

along corridors and within more compact urban nodes. Meanwhile, rapidly growing metropolitan areas are spilling over jurisdictional boundaries, impacting once suburban and/or rural areas. The social, economic, and environmental systems of urban cores and their outer suburbs are now, more than ever, intertwined and interlinked. In response to these trends, the Charlotte and Triangle regions are both embarking on ambitious planning initiatives to expand transportation options, in particular by investing in transit and supportive land planning at the local and regional levels.

The urban spatial structure of each of these regions differs, though both are seeing steady population growth. The Charlotte metropolitan area is a highly monocentric region anchored by the City of Charlotte, surrounded by communities with populations ranging from under 1,000 to close to 90,000. The Triangle region is polycentric in form, with Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill serving as the primary urban nodes, all with a population over 150,000. Both are also in different stages of regional transit planning and development. The Charlotte and Triangle regions have consistently looked to one another for planning inspiration. Charlotte already has over eighteen miles of light rail transit in place and efforts underway to plan for additional light rail lines and expand bus service locally and regionally. Planners in the Triangle aim to establish bus rapid transit routes in Raleigh and Chapel Hill, secure funding for the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project, and maintain and introduce fare-free transit in Chapel Hill and Durham, respectively.

Planning at the regional scale is becoming increasingly important as functional urban areas grow outward, leapfrogging jurisdictional boundaries. Increasingly, federal agencies expect communities to work together

as a region to address issues of shared concern; economic development and social opportunity issues are also increasingly regional in nature. Regional planning comes with inherent challenges due to governmental fragmentation and multiple overlapping and sometimes competing jurisdictions and funding sources. In North Carolina, where centralized authority at the regional level is relatively weak, regional planners must engage in coalition-building and educational outreach in order to accomplish a shared vision. As regions grow throughout the Southeast, planners and leaders at the state and local levels can borrow from the lessons learned during the expansion of transit in these two regions.

## CHARLOTTE REGION

The Centralina Council of Governments (CCOG) is the lead regional planning agency for the nine-county greater Charlotte region. As such, CCOG is often tasked with addressing complex issues that are multi-jurisdictional and long-term. The current challenge involves increasing transportation choices, namely cross-county transit, within the region. Engaging the public, local governments, and business leaders to understand common interests and encourage support and funding for regional transit is critical to the Charlotte region's continued economic competitiveness.

### **What's Going on Now?**

In the 2010 Census, the Charlotte region was identified as the fastest growing area with a population over one million, and the population is expected to almost double by 2050. The economy is regional, with over fifty percent of the population working in a different county than they live, and over 150,000 workers traveling into Mecklenburg County every weekday. Main arteries are heavily congested and prospective businesses are concerned about the state of transportation in the region. In addition, a recent study of intergenerational upward social mobility found that Charlotte was the worst performing large U.S. city for upward mobility. While the study highlighted Charlotte, the analysis was conducted for the Charlotte commuter zone (a ten-county area), making upward mobility a regional issue, and we know transportation access is a crucial element in providing access to jobs and housing as a means to escape poverty (Chetty, 2014).

The Charlotte Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was named the number one destination for millennials (18-34 year olds) in the nation after an analysis of in- and out-migration patterns completed in November 2016. At the same time, the region, like many others, is anticipating a greater number of seniors over the next two decades, both from in-migration and through "growing our own." These demographic trends in the greater Charlotte region point to the need and desire for transportation choices and increased mobility options to reduce household transportation budgets, support walkable land use patterns, encourage "aging in place," and provide independence later in life.

Between 2012 and 2015, CCOG led the development of a regional growth framework called CONNECT Our Future, a landmark achievement for the region. The plan came from an intense, three-year planning process involving four metropolitan planning organizations, a ninety-five-member project consortium, 120 local governments, and over 8,400 stakeholders.

Transportation choice emerged as a top growth priority, including an overwhelming interest in public transit from communities of all sizes. In fact, rural and small town leaders highlighted the need for increased transit options for job access; to address mobility needs for seniors, persons with disabilities, and veterans; and to support local economies by connecting non-drivers to local businesses. Leaders from across the region recognized that long-term transit planning should be accelerated in order to maintain the Charlotte MSA as a competitive region.

The region's comprehensive economic development strategy, as laid out in the 2017-2022 Prosperity for Greater Charlotte report, outlines key strategies that are needed for the region to maintain its competitive advantage for domestic and international commerce. Promoting transit planning to move people throughout the region is one of three tactics highlighted to improve and modernize regional infrastructure. The report outlines the importance of aligning economic development, housing, and employment with the regional transit system.



**FIGURE 1** - Planners engage with regional leaders and stakeholders to coordinate transit initiatives.  
Source: Centralina Council of Governments

The Charlotte Regional Freight Mobility Plan, a bi-state, fourteen-county, effort that involved state departments of transportation, transportation planning organizations, airports, ports, rail, and logistics businesses, highlights challenges and offers recommendations for moving goods and materials through and within the region. The plan notes that the Charlotte NC-SC region ranks forty-seventh in the nation for annual truck congestion, which costs the region \$131 million annually (Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), 2015). The plan also notes that over seventy-seven percent of the region's freight tonnage is moved by truck and that trucking will represent the biggest increase in regional freight movements over the next thirty years—yet another factor pointing to the need for transportation choices in the region.

Compared to peer regions, the Charlotte region is substantially lagging in the availability of cross-county transit options. The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) operates two light rail lines (the latest extension opened in March 2018). By December 2018, future corridors

will be identified to the southeast, west, and north of downtown, all predominantly within Mecklenburg County. This opens the door for regional transit planning to determine where transit lines should extend beyond the currently planned CATS routes and in the near-term, how communities outside Mecklenburg County can connect to the CATS corridors.

### ***Why Transit?***

Transit access offers multiple benefits to individuals including upward mobility, lowering a family's home/transportation costs, and providing access to jobs, services, and medical facilities. Transit-oriented development can help communities create attractive places, spur economic development, and open the door for a greater range of housing choices. In addition, the Charlotte region only narrowly meets the Environmental Protection Agency's health-based standard for ground-level ozone; therefore, public transit plays a role in maintaining healthy air, promoting sustainability, and reducing our contribution to climate change by offering an alternative to single-occupancy vehicle trips.

## **Regional Transit Engagement and Outcomes**

In late 2016, the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC), the policy board for the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS), asked the Centralina Council of Governments to continue the regional transit dialogue started in the CONNECT Our Future project.

Through a Regional Transit Public Engagement Series, stakeholders were given an opportunity to have a focused conversation about regional transit, well before any planning work took place. Communities expressed their aspirations, concerns, values, and interests around long-term transit. The geography for this work included Mecklenburg County, five North Carolina counties immediately adjacent to Mecklenburg County (Cabarrus, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, and Union counties), and the urbanized areas of Lancaster and York counties in South Carolina.

Beginning in March 2017, CCOG and CATS staff engaged local government managers, planners, and transportation professionals in eight counties over the ensuing two months. The results of this initial phase pointed to the need for a regional transit plan that would establish future transit lines and modes outside Mecklenburg County. Desired elements of the plan include:

- Mobility options and connections (other than light rail)
- Rapid transit destinations, corridors, and modes
- Regional commuter rail options
- Funding options, barriers, and peer region review
- Administrative structure options and peer region review

Other key outcomes included the need for a scan of the current transit operations in the region and solid messaging about the benefits of transit from a variety of viewpoints.

Feedback gathered during these early discussions guided work on a second phase, which included engagement from August through early October 2017. Across the same eight county geography, groups from the earlier phase were joined by local, state, and federal elected officials,

economic development organizations, institutions, and major employers. This phase of engagement highlighted the importance of simply continuing a regional transit conversation. Further, three major themes emerged that speak to why regional transit is important to this region's future success:

1. Ensuring global competitiveness and job retention
2. Meeting the mobility needs of a growing, changing population, and
3. Providing economic opportunity, through physical and social access, to a broader cross-section of our communities.

A key question during the engagement process asked participants to express how a regional transit plan would enable their community or county to take actions that they are not able to do now. Overwhelmingly, participants noted the efficiencies of collaboration across communities and the economic competitiveness gains that could be realized with a well thought-out regional transit plan. Participants responded that a regional transit plan would:

- Provide a unified vision and the potential of shared decision-making among local governments:
  - Provide a "larger voice" for jurisdictions that may not normally be heard
  - Make the region more competitive for outside funding
  - Save time now and save money in the long-term by coordinating as a region
  - Support the reservation of right-of-way that will be needed for transit
- Support economic competitiveness for all in the region
  - Offer predictability for economic development and business investment decisions
  - Present a unified message to businesses and residents considering the region or already here

As the latest round of engagement meetings wrapped up, a market research firm assessed the attitudes of the general public on transit-related issues, which included specific outreach to underrepresented groups, individuals with differing abilities, seniors, and veterans. The survey was intended to identify the tipping points for public transit ridership; such as cost, frequency, time, and transit stop location; to assess why residents would ride transit, and to determine how they would prefer to finance needed infrastructure improvements. Taken together, topics that have been identified as needing further attention from upcoming regional transit engagement and planning efforts include:

- Development of a regional transit vision as a next step beyond the CATS 2030 system update
- Enhancing local and regional mobility options and connections
- Regional collaboration opportunities around trip planning, fare payment, and integrated service
- Human Transportation Services coordination and planning
- Veteran transportation and cross-jurisdictional medical transportation
- Rapid transit destinations, rapid transit lines, and transit modes
- Regional commuter rail options
- Intentional engagement of local, state, and federal elected officials and staff to ensure identification of key policy issues important to the region
- Funding options, barriers, and best practices from peer regions
- Administrative structure options and peer region successes

### **Next Steps**

A Regional Transit Summit, to be held in May 2018, will invite national speakers to the region to discuss the economic benefits of transit, the mobility needs in the region, highlight case studies from successful regions, report the results of the Regional Transit Engagement Series, and serve as a call to action for moving forward with a regional transit plan. The regional transit plan is the clear next step to connect the CATS 2030 planned light rail lines to the rest of the region.

After the May 2018 Regional Transit Summit, work will shift to developing a plan scope, building support for funding, developing transit-supportive messaging, securing a plan consultant, and building the base of stakeholders needed for transit planning and future implementation efforts.

From the Fall of 2018 through 2020, the region will undertake the development of a regional transit plan and help communities that are ready prepare for the establishment of new, local funding sources (sales tax, value capture, tax increment financing, etc.) to move plans to reality.

Success will be measured through multiple milestones including:

- Developing a regional transit plan scope
- Securing funding for a transit plan
- Developing the regional transit plan
- Preparing communities with the information needed for county-wide discussions on future (possibly new) transit funding

## **Challenges**

A key need includes educating elected leadership, city/county management, and private sector leaders from across the region so that they understand the benefits and true costs of regional transit and can communicate both to others. Transit-supportive messaging is needed to speak to the core values of a diverse population. Success will also require that the regional transportation planning organizations understand their role in the process, which will include supporting the plan and incorporating results into their long-term planning documents. Federal agencies will need to document their support for the plan and provide funding for plan development.

The biggest hurdle related to regional transit planning is the geography and the number of communities and community leaders that need to be on the same page. This challenge is exacerbated by short election cycles and the continuous turnover of leadership. Another challenge is understanding when to bring in the broader public; it is not desirable to try to craft “all the answers” before public outreach, but there needs to be enough data for a solid information exchange.

Building support for the plan scope, identifying plan funding, and creating the plan will be time consuming and take expert facilitation, stakeholder engagement, and messaging. The greater Charlotte region has a track record of success for doing just that, as illustrated through the CONNECT Our Future project. Due to the pace of growth, there is a sense of urgency for developing mobility options. Only through continued engagement, collaboration, and partnerships, will our region be able to maintain the quality of life that our residents expect.

## **TRIANGLE REGION**

The Triangle region is a center of technology, education, governance, and culture for North Carolina. Anchored by major universities and the hallmark Research Triangle Park, the region has emerged as one of the driving economic engines in the state, experiencing decades of explosive growth.

## **What's Going on Now?**

Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, Cary, Research Triangle Park, and other fast-growing municipalities in the Durham and Raleigh metropolitan areas make up the Triangle region. With a 2016 combined Gross Regional Product of \$122 billion, the region is one of the largest and fastest growing economies in the Southeastern United States. Between 2005 and 2015, the population grew by 30 percent, adding nearly half a million people (TJCOG, 2017). Despite economies that rely upon a geographically diverse workforce, the Triangle has struggled to establish a unified metropolitan vision and regional identity (Geary, 2008). The first efforts began in 1987 with a series of “World-Class Region” conferences, where the goal was to find ways for making the region successful. These conferences convened leaders in local government and business with the goal of creating a foundation for collaboration.

The conferences had some successes. A 1992 vision statement from the conference stated: “We have learned the necessity of sharing resources, though the lessons have not been easy and they are not yet fully learned. Our inability to cooperate and unite in common goals limits us.” A priority emerged from the conferences, one that leaders recognized could be the glue that might hold the multiple jurisdictions in the Triangle together: transit. In 1991, the Triangle Transit Authority (TTA) was established to draft a long-range transit strategy and to operate bus services across county and municipal lines, supplementing local and university bus companies and bringing each of the municipalities closer together. TTA started with bus service. It soon became apparent that the agency could work to get ahead of the curve, anticipating population growth and development, and the light rail plan was born. TTA worked on a light rail plan to connect Durham to Raleigh for close to 10 years with support from the federal government and had some successes. In the mid-2000s however, soaring costs brought federal support, and this plan, to an end.



**FIGURE 2** - A GoTriangle rendering shows what the dedicated guideway could look like along U.S. 15-501 in Durham.

For several years questions remained. What would be the role of TTA? What is the role of transit in the region? All the while, support for transit persisted. Local leaders formulated a new vision with a substantial plan for heightened bus service, bicycle and pedestrian improvements, and a regional rail system. Meanwhile, legislation that passed through the North Carolina General Assembly allowed Wake, Durham, and Orange counties to put in place a half-cent sales tax to fund transit. Durham and Orange counties began to work to come up with county plans, led by their respective County Commissioners (Gulley, 2017). Durham County and Orange County each passed referenda in 2011 and 2012, establishing the half-cent sales tax to help fund transit. These successes allowed new bus service and expanded bus routes.

### ***The Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project Picks Up Speed, With Hurdles***

The Triangle is moving ahead with light rail plans that will connect stops in downtown Durham, the medical center in Chapel Hill, and multiple places in between. To those who have lived in the Triangle for decades, the project has been a consistent promise of a big-city amenity in a region of multiple disconnected centers—a promise that to many has always seemed just beyond reach, even as comparable systems have flourished around the country. Between 2000 and 2015, light rail passenger trips on the country's 27 light rail systems doubled to 1.6 million daily unlinked trips (APTA, 2000, 2016). North American light rail investments totaled \$40 billion in 2015 (Freemark, 2015).

In a time of sustained attacks on government intervention at all levels, there is seemingly little that defines planning in a time of uncertainty more aptly than the decision to move forward with a multibillion dollar transit project, especially given that it requires fifty percent of its funding from the federal government during a chaotic time period. Yet taking no action to develop public transit in a dynamic region would be a highly risky decision itself that, according to cost-of-congestion studies, could have dismal financial and economic consequences for the region, not to mention impacts on open space, air emissions, and quality of life. A 2014 study conducted by INRIX and the Centre for Economics and Business Research estimated that nationwide traffic congestion is responsible for \$124 billion per year in direct and indirect costs, and that this number will likely rise to annual costs of \$186 billion by 2030, if nothing is done about traffic.

Given the recent population and economic growth seen in the Triangle, and the traffic congestion that comes with it, the greatest risk could simply be to maintain the status quo. Further, the status quo is built on the unsustainable model of disconnected, automobile-oriented sprawl, which polarizes communities by race, class, and values, and deepens their reliance on fossil fuels.

One of the challenges of making the public case for light rail in the United States is the nature of transportation funding: road and highway funding is typically more reliable, and the cost of road development projects is rarely made publicly available. As a result, the average person is unlikely able to recite the huge costs of building and maintaining road infrastructure; meanwhile, a single light rail line will have a single published number, making it a much easier target for criticism, especially when it is continuously debated in local news outlets. Turning to the other side of the ledger, it is difficult to quantify the benefits of fixed rail transit, especially when they are paired with land use planning that creates synergistic effects around transit-oriented development, affordable housing investments, and the modern market shifts that favor more sustainable lifestyles.

Aside from the challenges, the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project continues to hold enormous promise for regional economic development. According to a July 2017 market study and demand forecast produced for GoTriangle by Toyon Group and Gateway Planning Group, the project's investments could be leveraged to encourage numerous desired outcomes. The market study identified five key outcomes, including:

- “Additional tax revenue due to accelerated higher-value growth in station areas;
- Accelerated commercial growth including attraction of class “A” office space, global headquarters, and other large corporate users as well as resulting complementary retail and hospitality uses;
- Increased housing choices and commuting options across a range of incomes;
- Reduced costs of associated infrastructure and maintenance required to support new residents and business activity due to fewer linear miles of new water and wastewater lines, roads, and utilities; and,
- Expansion of the communities' economic base, facilitating priority policies such as making affordable housing available in accessible, high-quality neighborhoods.”

Thanks to broad support for transit across the region, planners have managed to advance the project into the engineering phase. However, this progress came with several hurdles and there are remaining threats. Although the plan originally had the state picking up twenty-five percent of the cost, the North Carolina General Assembly's sudden decision to cap the state's funding at ten percent forced Durham and Orange counties to increase their commitments from twenty-five to forty percent. The local share now sits at roughly \$750 million, over \$250 million more than originally anticipated, in addition to short- and long-term debt. Durham and Orange counties are still working out exactly how they will split the cost, but Durham, where more of the system's infrastructure is planned, will likely pick up most of the added cost (Grubb, 2017). Each

county will pay for its portion with revenue from the general fund, a half-cent transit tax, car rental fees, and vehicle registration taxes.

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has also modified its potential commitment to the project, originally backing the project with eighty percent of the cost. That commitment was later reduced to fifty percent, a substantial reduction for multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects (Gulley, 2017). Recently, the FTA reduced its expected annual payout to \$100 million a year from \$125 million a year during the approximately eight year construction period. The final federal contribution will also depend on the project receiving the funding from state and regional partners, and is expected after 2020.

These changes leave a \$200 million gap, in addition to financing costs, that GoTriangle and local governments have to fill until the federal reimbursements catch up (Grubb, 2017). The gap could be filled with a combination of additional local government commitments, cash contributions, other federal grants, and land donations. Federal funding is further complicated by the fact that President Trump's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2019 would eliminate, among other programs, future New Starts transit programs. The American Planning Association condemned the budget proposal, stating that it "fails local communities" and "undermines existing local community development, housing, and transportation programs" (American Planning Association, 2018). A more favorable spending plan passed by Congress in March 2018 delivered a broad rebuke of the President's vision, but the threat remains. Without federal funding, the light rail transit project, and other transportation infrastructure projects around the country, could be delayed. Previous delays have driven up overall cost estimates as the construction costs, including the price of steel, have ballooned. Additional cost increases may follow recently imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports.

Thus far, the existence of coalitions has helped keep the project moving forward. With political turmoil

prompting uncertainty at various levels of government, local coalitions have helped the project stay on course. To find solutions to state budget cuts and federal transportation funding changes, GoTriangle's Board of Trustees formed the Funding and Community Collaborative, a blue ribbon group made up of private citizens and leaders from universities, private industries, health care institutions, and governments, to work together to advance the project. GoTriangle learned from cities like Atlanta and Detroit, where nonprofits assisted in project financing, and established GoTransit Partners, a 501(c)(3). Initial members of the nonprofit's board of directors were appointed in August 2017. The nonprofit will be able to receive philanthropic donations, especially those identified by the Collaborative, including tax-deductible donations of property (real property, money, and other personal property). The tax benefits associated with donations to a nonprofit organization are anticipated to make contributions more desirable to individuals and businesses. Additionally, the nonprofit will be eligible to seek foundation grants not typically available to public agencies. The Republican-led federal income tax overhaul passed in December 2017 may challenge this strategy by reducing financial incentives for giving to nonprofit organizations.

### ***Coalitions Mobilize for Not Just Great Transit, But Good Transit, Too***

Decades ago, a man named Wib Gulley campaigned for mayor of the City of Durham, pledging to make Durham "not just a great city, but a good city," referring to the need to not just grow the economy, but also create a city that worked for everyone (Feldblum, 2017). He went on to become a North Carolina state senator, general counsel to the Triangle Transit Authority, and an affordable housing advocate. Senator Gulley was also a key early supporter of the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project, an initiative that has undergone multiple iterations of planning and design. It is the centerpiece project of an overall strategy to expand access to transit throughout Durham and the Triangle.

The process to develop and pass the new Durham County and Orange County transit plans involved a lot of conversations with local elected officials, public engagement sessions, and informal conversations; GoTriangle played a critical role in providing staffing and technical expertise. Additionally, there were numerous grassroots citizen-advocates from diverse business, environmental, neighborhood, and political groups who supported the plan and stepped up and worked together to pass the referendums (Gulley, 2017). An important feature of the information that was used to help build public support for the light rail project was an emphasis on characteristics of the expected ridership pool: a diverse population of office commuters, lower-wage workers, students, hospital patients, and families.

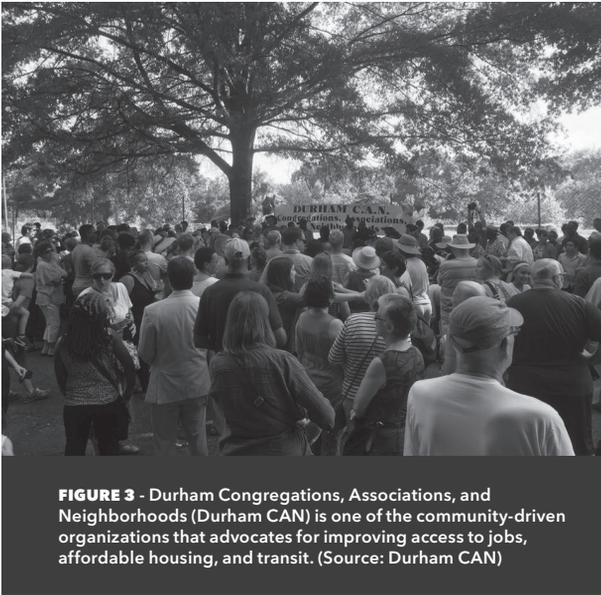
In Durham, a people-powered coalition movement from a broad cross-section of the population is pushing for transit, transit-oriented planning, and affordable housing around key transit nodes. With an influx of more than 60,000 people along the light rail line over the next twenty years, and annual economic growth in the Durham metro area of

between three and five percent, housing prices and rents are rising steadily, a trend expected to escalate over the next twenty years (GoTriangle, 2017). As a result, land values could rise between 700 and 900 percent (Sorg, 2014).

Providing subsidized affordable housing around light rail stations is typically considered fundamental to achieving equity goals, especially as planners redefine affordability as including housing plus transportation costs and recognize that low-income people rely on transit more heavily than those with the means to own and maintain their own vehicles. Yet building new affordable units, especially for low-income and very low-income populations, can be challenging due to the rapid increase in land value around large fixed-route transit infrastructure projects.

The Coalition for Affordable Housing and Transit is a grassroots citizen-led coalition of organizations that advocates on behalf of disadvantaged, transit-dependent, and low-income members of the region. The coalition is made up of organizations like the Durham Congregations, Associations & Neighborhoods (Durham CAN), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People, the Durham People's Alliance, and the InterNeighborhood Council of Durham (INC). The coalition is also supported by an advisory committee of former members of local governing, administrative, and advisory bodies including the North Carolina General Assembly and Durham City Council.

The coalition's primary goal is focused on the provision of affordable housing around rail transit stations and bus hubs in Durham. To achieve this, the group pushed for the passage of a resolution that fifteen percent of homes within a half-mile radius of each transit station would be affordable to residents earning less than sixty percent of area median income (less than \$40,000 per year for a family of four), which was ultimately unanimously adopted by the City Council and County Commission (CAHT, 2015).



**FIGURE 3** - Durham Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods (Durham CAN) is one of the community-driven organizations that advocates for improving access to jobs, affordable housing, and transit. (Source: Durham CAN)

The coalition has also worked to expand and enhance transit service throughout the City and was instrumental in the passage of referendums for a sales tax dedicated to transit. The coalition also advocates drawing from the local labor force for transit-related careers, and establishing a living wage for workers.

Election results in Durham's November 2017 election dramatically reshaped the City Council, filling seats with candidates who ran on transit and affordable housing platforms. This sweep could be read as a signal of the community's desire for a broad shift of local government policies and spending to prioritize these issues. The City's new mayor, Steve Schewel, worked on former Mayor Gulley's election campaign many years ago, and has since been an advocate and councilmember pushing for these and other social and economic programs. With multiple candidates-turned-councilmembers that ran on a platform of expanded services and equity, including a fare-free bus system, the City is politically positioned for aggressive public investments in local bus services that will likely connect to regional lines and provide services to those who most heavily rely on them.

### ***Getting the Land Planning Right***

On the other end of the light rail transit project sits the Town of Chapel Hill, home to the University of North Carolina (UNC) and UNC Medical Center. In spite of its disconnected road network and low-density development pattern, Chapel Hill has pursued planning policies curbing sprawl, promoting compact development, and creating permanent affordable housing—initiatives that have had success.

Some of the resulting policy tools are unique to the Town, and reflect proactive decisions made by past planners and policymakers. These policy tools include an urban growth boundary, inclusionary zoning, form-based codes, and planning for transit-oriented development. The urban growth boundary is made possible through the 2001 Orange County-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Joint Planning Agreement that limits density and utility

extensions in designated rural areas. Although it may not be considered true inclusionary zoning (North Carolina statutes limit such a program), the 2010 enactment of one of North Carolina's most aggressive inclusionary housing programs requires that a minimum of fifteen percent of new homeownership units be affordable for low- to moderate-income households, including partnerships with the Community Home Trust to maintain the housing units and keep the units permanently affordable.

More recently, and not without controversy, compact redevelopment has manifested itself outside of the Franklin Street and Rosemary Street corridors in the Ephesus Fordham District, a new zoning district that was adopted in 2014. The area includes automobile-oriented shopping centers built between the mid-1950s through the 1980s. Although this district is located away from the proposed light rail line, its vision for walkable, compact, connected, and mixed use form serves as a learning experience for urban redevelopment around light rail stations. Subsequent high-density mixed-use development resulted in a well-organized political backlash, but the densities and urban form are a step in the right direction for helping to provide more transportation choices to the region's residents.

GoTriangle, the Town of Chapel Hill, the City of Durham, and the Triangle J Council of Governments (TJCOG) are coordinating land use planning around stations, aiming to establish the framework for transit-oriented development. A \$2.1 million grant was awarded by the Federal Transit Administration through 2018 for the land use planning project. Most of the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit stations are planned within existing built urban areas where most land development will take the form of redevelopment and infill. The only exception to this is the Gateway Station area, the majority of which lies within the North 15-501 Focus Area identified in the Chapel Hill 2020 comprehensive plan as a site for further study due to its high development potential. As planning progresses, this small area should be watched closely for lessons in greenfield transit-oriented development planning.

### ***Lessons for Planners***

Planning for transit holds enormous potential for fast-growing regions, through fostering and absorbing new growth, creating choices for residents and employers, improving the environment, nurturing upward economic mobility, and creating potential for compact transit-oriented development. Yet transit initiatives in both the Charlotte and Triangle regions highlight the importance of coordinated planning efforts that link transportation and land use planning, and incorporate the programs and policies desired by the local community, with special attention on underserved groups.

Conversations taking place in the Charlotte area may help to improve regional coordination for transit and could serve as a model for multijurisdictional collaboration on other issues of regional importance. With ever growing risks to projects that have taken decades to plan, the light rail experience in the Triangle illustrates how planning with coalitions helps to adapt to diverse and dynamic political environments—responding to uncertainty in an era of anti-government sentiments from leadership at the federal and state levels. If such projects cannot be carried out, it is likely that congestion would dampen the economic potential of American metropolitan areas and hinder their ability to compete in the global economy.

It is the planner's job to monitor trends and patterns that are shaping our communities, to provide information and education about challenges and opportunities, and to support efforts to plan intelligently and purposefully for the future. The work going on to plan for public transit in the Charlotte and Triangle regions of North Carolina is noteworthy, and offers lessons for the planning community about how these challenges can be successfully addressed, and how to use transit-oriented planning to help create prosperous and resilient futures.



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